

Interview with Sterling Cale by Jan K. Herman, Medical Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Pearl Harbor, HI, June 19, 2009. (1921-2024)

I'm going to ask you to identify yourself. Tell us your name.

I'm Command Sergeant Major Sterling Robert Cale, U.S. Army retired.

Tell us about yourself. You grew up in Illinois but you joined the Navy. Tell us about why you joined the Navy and when?

Actually, I was a sophomore in high school in Moline, Illinois, and the recruiting sergeant came down from Chicago and said, "Anybody want to join the Navy?"

I said, "Yeah, I do."

And he said, "What you want to do?"

I said, "Well, I heard they have lighter than air in their training in Lakehurst, New Jersey, and the dirigibles, and I want to be up in the air. I don't want to be a ground pounder in the Army."

He said, "Sir, we'll sign you up." So I went ahead and was going on to high school. I hadn't graduated yet, and in 1937, the von Hindenburg, the Pride of Germany, came in and was tying up at Lakehurst, and the damn thing blew up and burned. All the people were killed. The Navy said, "We don't want anything like that. We're going to cancel the program." So that was the reason that I was going to go into the Navy, with that.

So I graduated out of high school in January 1939, and in January it's kind of cold at Great Lakes; we're out there trying to row a boat in the water and the ice, and when I got through my training at Great Lakes, he said, "Well, Cale, we don't have any lighter than air. We're going to send you down to San Diego, California to the Hospital Corps School, and you're going to become a hospital corpsman. And so that's what they did. They sent me to San Diego.

Q: So, how did you end up here at Pearl Harbor?

A: I graduated number two in my class down at San Diego, and said, "Oh boy, I'm not going to be a farmer anymore. They're going to send me back to Illinois." Well, first man went back to Illinois and said, "Just think, Cale, you have your choice of worldwide assignments." Well, I thought it was worldwide already, a farm boy from Illinois being in California from Illinois. "Oh, I remember, there's a little series of islands 2,000 miles off the coast of the United States called the Territory of Hawaii, and I hear they have beautiful girls there with long black hair clear down to their waists, and I even hear some of them have grass skirts and live in grass shacks." I said, "Hell, give me Pearl Harbor." So I'm going out of San Diego on an old diesel called the U.S.S. (**? 2.45 Brasal**). It was full of diesel oil and they were hauling it over there. That ship was so old they didn't even have bunks for us; we had to put our hammocks down below for a place to sleep. Got out there about two days in the water, and they said, "Well, Cale, we're going to send you up in the boatsman's chair to paint the mast." So we were up there, 30 feet up. And the ship was rolling back and forth, 115° in the shade, and I'd throw up on one side of the ship and swipe

the mast as I'd come back and throw up on the other side of the ship, and they said, "Cale, we've got to haul you down. You're painting the ocean but we're not getting enough done on the mast."

So it took us two more days; it took four days before we finally got here at Pearl Harbor, and I was assigned to the old Naval Hospital up at Hospital Point Sea Landing. Well, up there this old hospital was built in 1917, four years before I was born. It was really an old job. But we were there and I was the senior corpsman on the ward, the officer's ward, and I had become a hospital apprentice, first class, by now. Well, we didn't have any nurses. I said, "Where's the nurses?"

"Oh, we're going to have nurses, but we're getting them later."

"Okay, where's the doctors?" Oh, we feather merchants; we had Reserve doctors that came in from Eva Plantation. They'd come over and tell us what treatment to give the patient, what medicine to give the patient, then they'd go back home. Things in Hawaii were much different than they were today. They had a train that went all the way from Pearl Harbor down to Honolulu we could ride. We had a place called the Black Cat Café in Honolulu where all of the military went because they could get hotdogs, hamburgers, and Cokes and stuff like that, and even hats and real cheap beer for as many 17-year-olds that we had in the service and not much alcohol in it, but they could get beer. And down the street about two doors we could get a tattoo. I said, "Oh boy, I'm going to get me a tattoo later." Across the street was the YMCA, and down to the right was the YWCA. Well, I went down there and I see these guys, they run out to the street and throw up, another guy would drink a pint of wine, another guy would pass out, and I said, "Gee, really must be something to get a tattoo." So I got my tattoo, only .50¢ in those days. It was just an outline of a hula girl. The Navy Department said, "Hey, you can't have naked women on your arm." So I had to put a skirt on her and a lei around the neck cost me another \$1.50--\$2.00 all together. The same tattoo today would probably cost you \$200.00.

Well, the other thing we did, we went around the island a lot. We went swimming; we ate the different Hawaiian foods, and sometimes Doris Duke Cromwell, the tobacco heiress, would pick us up in her convertible down at Olive Park, with her blonde hair blowing in the breeze, and she'd take us out and bring us to Pearl Harbor. And sometimes she'd invite us over to her house for a party. She had a four-masted schooner there called the *Seth Parker*, and we'd go aboard the schooner for the party. Well, that just about concludes that portion of my tale because in July of 1941, I was transferred down to the ship yard dispensary in the Navy yard.

At the ship yard dispensary we took care of the civilians that worked there and any military that got sick or hurt during the evening. They'd come along and we'd take care of them. And on the morning of December 7th, I had gotten off duty at 6:30 in the morning; I had to walk about .75 of a mile down to the main gate where they had the receiving station. The receiving station was there because everybody going in or out of the Navy base had to come in and sign out with the master at arms. So I went in, signed out with the master at arms, said, "Okay chief, I'm going home." And all the Pearl

Harbor survivors that were medical people lived out in civilian housing. We didn't live on base. And I went out the main gate, looked over toward battle ship row, and, "What the hell is this?" Planes are diving and firing on the battle wagons. I said, "We don't train on Sunday." My god, the only people that gets up on Sunday, a guy gets up and goes to chow, a guy gets up and goes to early Mass, the rest of us sleep till 8:00. Suddenly I saw one of the planes turn off in the rising sun on the fuselage and wings and I said, "My god, those are Japanese planes." I ran over to the receiving station, too the fire ax, was breaking down the door of the armory to hand out the O3 Springfield rifles."

(Brief interruption) 0:08:20

So I saw the Japanese planes and the rising sun on the fuselage and wingtips and I said, "By god, those are Japanese planes." I ran over to the receiving station, took the fire ax, was breaking down the door of the armory to hand out the O3 Springfield, the single-shot weapon. Well, it was a good rifle, but it was only one shot where you load and lock, fire and eject, load and lock, fire and eject, and the second round; you're so slow the war is over. But anyway, we gave out one of the rifles a bandoleer of ammunition to anyone that came in and wanted one. Hospital corpsmen didn't get a weapon in those days because they said, "You have first-aid packs, you don't need a weapon." Okay. So after this I came back out to 10-10 dock and I'm just watching what's going on over here. And suddenly, I hear a big noise coming from the other direction, hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, and I looked over there but the sun was right in my eyes-it was close to 8:00 in the morning; I couldn't see anything. Suddenly, a bunch of aerial torpedo bombers, the kates, came right over my shoulder and started dropping off aerial torpedoes. Boy, I looked to see and they were all headed out towards Battleship Row, and I said, "My god, if those hit there will really be hell to pay. I don't know what they're going to do." But then I ran down the dock about 50 feet, caught the officer's barge, and we started out towards the *Oklahoma*. I saw seven or eight of those aerial torpedoes hit the *Oklahoma*, and we couldn't even get there. It turned over and sank in 12 minutes with 429 men aboard. I said, "I don't know why battleships are made from four-way water-tight integrity. You can shift the balance and even if they get hit they won't sink." But they must have just had so many that they couldn't do anything about it and it was that early in the morning.

So I get out there, I had been training to be a frogman, so I spent a lot of time training in the water, and actually, the SEALs trained at the same place we did out at the end of Ford Island. And so our duty uniform in those days was just shorts and t-shirts. So I'm out there in the doggone water, oh boy, trying to swim. The diesel had leaked out of the ships that had been sunk and caught fire, so we're swimming down under the water. We'd break water, see somebody to be picked up and go back down and pick them up. Well, the officer's barge, you couldn't pick up many people and put on there because they aren't meant for hauling things like they're meant for people, passengers. So I only picked up 46 people, I think, in four hours. Some of them were dead already-some badly wounded, some badly burned, and some were just tired because they got blown off the ship or jumped off and had to get ashore. We had very little room for the dead people, so sometimes we just had to throw a line around their leg and haul them behind the boat until we could get them to shore.

Well, after four hours, I'm really tired. I went back to the receiving station and I said, "Ho, I'm going home."

He said, "Hey, you can't go home. You're going to have a deck court-martial."

"What for?"

"Breaking into the armory in peacetime."

"We're at war," I said, "They're shooting at us. Isn't that called war?"

He said, "Yes, but this is peace time. Nobody declared war yet."

I said, "What happens in peace time?"

"Well, you got to sign out your weapons and sign out your ammo. And when you get through firing you sign them back in."

I was lucky; Franklin Roosevelt, our President, declared war the next day. He said, "I declare war against Japan." Fine. So they called me back in and gave me my carton of cigarettes, an award for breaking into the armory. I said, "I'm still tired. I'm going home."

He said, "No, you can't go home. You're the only petty officer I have. I need you to do a job."

I said, "Yes, sir. What job?"

He said, "Well, you're going to be on the front door of the receiving station. Nobody in or out that don't belong there."

So I said, "I'm still tired."

He said, "It doesn't matter." He said, "Take one of those O3 Springfields and stand on the front door."

"Yes, sir." Well, in the meantime, the medical admiral from Camp Smith Hospital came down and I snapped to attention, and he said, "Cale, what you doing here?"

"I'm guarding the door, sir. Ain't nobody in or out that don't belong here."

"Yeah, but Cale, pharmacist's mates don't have weapons. They have first-aid packs." He said, "I'm taking you off of the detail."

“But sir, Master at arms told me to...” not thinking, what the hell, the admiral can send me to Timbuktu if he wants to. So, I took off and he said, “I’ll give you another job later on.” Okay.

Well, later on that morning-actually of December 7th, the *Arizona* had taken a bomb from 12,000 feet up, a 1,700 pound bomb came down and hit the *Arizona*, went down one, two, three, four decks down to the ammunition locker and powder magazine and blew up with a giant explosion. Somehow, I must have been down in the water. I heard the thing, but I couldn’t hear anything down in the water. When I got up I saw what had happened and the *Arizona* was all ablaze, smoke all over the place and great big fire. The whole front end had been blown up and was laying in the water, and the ship went down 40 feet into the mud and silt. And I said, “Boy, I don’t know what’s going to happen now. What I’m watching, I’m going to do now. I don’t have anything I can do.” Well, I waited. There wasn’t anything on the island. The whole damn island was under black out condition. Nobody could have any lights showing. If you had a light showing the chief would pull up, arrest everybody in the house and leave you in jail one day, a week, a year, or gone forever. And so, the *Arizona* was the only light you could see because the *Arizona* burned for two and a half days, and you could see it from the whole island.

Finally, by Wednesday, the admiral came back and said, “I’ve got that job for you, Cale.”

“Yes, sir.”

He said, “Friday, pick up ten men, go down to the ferry, go out to the *Arizona* and start removing the bodies.”

But I said, “Sir, I’ve never been aboard a battle wagon.”

He said, “It doesn’t matter. You’re in charge and you’ll learn fast once you get out there.”

“Okay.” So, Friday I picked up my ten men, went down to the ferry, and I said, “Well, men, I don’t have the slightest idea what we’re going to find. But as a hospital corpsman, I can tell you that if a bodies been in the water from Sunday until Friday of the next week, the body starts to blow up.” We had a lot of fish in the water, 24, 25 kinds—moray eels, tiger sharks, I said, “They’ll start feeding on the bodies.” And I said, “Those men down there, four decks down, and I can’t even imagine what’s going to happen to them. We can’t go down and find out for our salvage gears were outside the ship, not down inside the ship, so we won’t be able to, but I should imagine that with that type of explosion, anybody within 500 to 1,000 yards, there’s probably just little pieces of flesh. Didn’t know, really, what happened until I got up and saw what happened.

Q: What did you see when you got to the surface?

A: When they came up you could see the whole thing is burning over there, black smoke all over the place. I said, “What happened.” I didn’t really know until I had read it in one of the books what actually happened.

- Q: Okay, go back to the part where you're going out and you're going to dive and try to retrieve the bodies.
- A: Okay, I said, "I don't know what we're going to find, men. We're down here at the ferry but as we're going out I'm going to tell you what I am dreading, what we're going to find. As a hospital corpsman, I can tell you that if a body's been in the water for that length of time, Sunday until Friday of the next week, they start to blow up. We had a lot of fish in the water in those days, 24 or 25 kinds-moray eels, tiger sharks, and they'll start feeding on the bodies, and for those people that are down there in the fourth deck of the *Arizona*, I can't even imagine what happened. Our salvage gear will not let us go down in the ships-salvage gears were outside the ship, but I should imagine anybody with 500 to 1,000 yards down there with a giant explosion, just little pieces of flesh. The whole front end of the *Arizona* had went down in the water and it was down in the silt of 40 feet down, and we're going to have to go aboard over here where the quartermaster goes aboard, or where the men go off and on a ship. So we got out there and went aboard. About the first thing I saw on the ship, I think, was a bunch of-something black was blowing off the ship. I thought, "I don't know what that is." Well, it must be ashes from something. And I said, "Oh, it looks like ashes. That must be from one of the bodies because the doggone ship burned for two and a half days, and since I don't have a broom, I can't stop the ashes from blowing off the ship." And I sort of sank down and cried a few tears. And I got to thinking about it and I said, "Hey, I've got ten men out there waiting for me to tell them what to do." So I sprang back into action and I said, "Okay, men, spread out on the ship. When you find a body bring it in. We'll put him in the sea bag, send him up to Red Hill for temporary burial." So I think the next, probably, thing that we saw was a bunch of helmet liners lying across the ship there, but nobody around close to them, somebody had to be carrying them. So they opened up the hatch there and looked down, well, there's the body down there, but it didn't have a head, so that must have been the ashes that I saw blowing off of the ship was the head of this man. So I said, "Just pick him up, put him in the sea bag and we'll send him up to Red Hill for temporary burial."

Well, a lot of the men had burned right down to the deck; it was just little piles of ashes. We couldn't tell who they were or what they were other than they were placed so that many of them were right behind the big guns, the 5-inch .50s, so we knew this was their place of duty, and maybe later on they could tell who they were because they were supposed to be on duty at those points. I said, "We're just going to do what we can now." So they didn't have any dog tags on. What a shame. How come you don't have dog tags? Everybody goes through the training center and gets two dog tags, one to put in the mouth and one to put on the big toe because this is how you identify the military personnel. One of my friends off the *Pennsy*, he said, "Well, we didn't have no dog tags."

I said, "Well, I don't know where you came in the service from, the east coast or some other place, but most everybody I know has a dog tag. Or if you weren't wearing a dog tag you won't have a dog tag, of course." But then I figure if they weren't wearing their dog tags, probably if they were the doggone thing is made out of aluminum, and

aluminum just burns down to nothing, unrecognizable. So that's another big job we had. We've made the dog tags out of a metal later on. So, I said, "Okay, men, just do what we can, pick up what we can." And while I think we found the next batch of people were in the control tower. They'd gone up the ladder there and the fire caught them; they'd been reduced to charcoal. Each one of the men would just bring all together like this, and they were about three feet tall, so I'm trying to spread them apart so we could put them in the sea bags and send them up to Red Hill. The head would come off, or the arm, or leg, or something. We just had to get whatever we could and put it in the sea bag and get rid of it. Because actually, I figure we have 400 unknowns up at Pensco, and there's probably some of those unknowns that I picked up, and so if they excavate one of the caches today, they may find that one of the men in there may not have a head, or he may have one arm and three legs, but it won't have a complete body.

And so I got really tired after being there about three weeks, and I went back to the master at arms, "I'm going home." I said, "I'm really tired again."

"Oh, you can't go home." He said, "Tomorrow, don't go out to the *Arizona* because you're going to have a summary court-martial."

I said, "A summary for what? I had a captain's mass with nothing, now what's a summary for?"

"Well, the old chief pharmacist down at the dispensary said you're keeping a war diary."

"I'm not keeping a war diary. I'm just taking notes."

"Well, in time of war you're not supposed to tell where the troops are going or how many are going there."

I said, "Hey, these are just cadavers I'm picking up and sending to Red Hill for burial. This is not a war time situation."

So, I went to my court martial and the commander says, "Where's your war diary?"

I said, "In my notes, sir." So I handed him my notes. He took it, opened it, and read it, declared it a war diary, and had it burned. I said, "My god, my first three weeks went to hell. I don't know how many people I picked up, what I did with them, where I sent them, nothing about them. It's just like I wasn't ever here." I said, "Who was it that put me on report commander?"

"Oh, the old chief pharmacist's mate down at the ship yard dispensary."

Ah-ha, see I was in charge of the pharmacy and laboratory down there at the dispensary and once a month, or once every three weeks, actually, I'd give the old chief a pint of ethyl alcohol, 190-proof, and he didn't have his rations for three weeks, so he figured if

he put me on report for some reason, I'd have to go back to my duty station and he'd get his ration. I said, "You old son-of-a-gun, you won't even get a teaspoon full, and you better be long gone before I get back to my duty station." So actually, I stayed on duty another three weeks taking off bodies. But I had no idea how many men were on the Arizona; I'd never been aboard a battle wagon. I only took off 109 people; a lot of them had been taken off and put over on the hospital ship, and even the Captain Kidd, who was on there, we never found him. They found his ring and his sea chest, but we never found the captain. I figured, "Well, maybe he's one of the piles of ashes that we took off," but nobody ever knew, so 109 men is not many men on a battle wagon.

But, when I finally came back from Vietnam in '74 I said, "I've got to go out and pay my respects to the men I left on the ship," and when I came back there I found out that there were 1,177 men on the ship and I only took off 109, my god, I left some 900 men on the ship.

So, I went back to the receiving station, again, I was trying to go home, but they wouldn't let anybody go home for the next two weeks, so I never got to go home and I just had to lay around the receiving station and do whatever they had me to do, and so that concludes my story of December 7, 1941.

Q: The other day we were talking and your son mentioned that you don't go swimming anymore?

A: I can't go swimming, no. Actually, I get sick when I get in the water because of all the diesel that was there and burning, and somehow it just was that, so I haven't been in the water since 1941.

And I had a story that I always tell about my son when we were stationed out at the Navy Rifle Range at Poloah Point, where you first come into the harbor, and I had a dog named Gizmo, a retread from World War II, and my son was very young then, and he was sitting on the table down by the water and a big wave came in, caught the dog on the table and it's heading out to the ocean. I said, "Victoria," she was up in a fire control tower that we were living in, a converted one from the camp there, I couldn't move. I wanted to go and get my son, I couldn't go; she was upstairs, she couldn't move and get him. I said, "Gizmo, get him," and Gizmo ran out and grabbed him by the seat of the pants and pulled him back into the water, but because I had not been in the water since '41, I couldn't do a thing about it.

Q: So it's been almost 70 years?

A: Yeah.

Q: And I guess because of what you do here you think about it often, don't you?

A: Actually, because I do the video conferences all the time, I never think about it except on December 7th. The last two years we'd had our ceremony at Kilo Pier over in the Navy Yard in 2010, this place will be rebuilt and we'll have it back on here. So, on December 7th each year, we have our ceremony. The planes are much faster nowadays when they

come in with their missing man formation and dive on the *Arizona*, dive on the ceremony right there and then they go straight up, vrooom, boy, all the chills go right down my back.

(29.20 Recording breaks)

Q: So the story about your son?

A: Yeah, we were living in a two-story fire control tower that used to control the big, 16-inch gun that controlled the mouth of the harbor, and we were living there in this fire-controlled tower, and we were having the little fish that we were going to eat, and my son was sitting on a table over by the water, actually, and suddenly a big wave came in and he was going right out of the harbor, going to end up out in the ocean, and I hollered up to Victoria, who was upstairs, "Victoria, come and get your son. He's going out in the water." I couldn't move, I said, "What the hell's happening?" Nothing was happening, she wasn't moving; I couldn't move, and I said, "Gizmo, get him." And old Gizmo ran out and picked him up by the seat of his pants and hauled him back in. But, I haven't been in the water, like I said, since 1941. I guess even if a member of my family is going to be killed, it would be something if I could move out and get out into the water and save him. They said, "What's the matter? Can't you swim?"

I said, "Well, we had to swim. I had to swim 300 yards back at Great Lakes before I could graduate from the station." But, I just can't go out in the water and I don't.

Q: And it all stems from you having to take...

A: Be out there on December 7th, yes. It's just a figment of my imagine, I guess, in my mind.

Q: I want to just ask you, you said something the other day, that the reason that you won't go in the water is it brings back everything?

A: No, when I go in the water I smell this diesel that was burning out there in the ocean and I just feel sick when I'm in the water, so I just don't go in the water is all.

Q: Tell the story about the-you were talking about the missing man formation. Tell us about that again.

A: Oh, the missing man, every time on December 7th we have a ceremony...

(31.57 Recording breaks)

Q: The question I'll ask you, we've asked you twice already, but the last time you answered great, but then right in the middle of it there was a bang and messed it up. Again, it's the reason you don't go in the water, tell us that again one more time.

A: I spent four hours on the water on December 7th, and the reason I don't go in the water anymore is when I get in there I smell all of the burning flesh and the diesel and it just makes me sick, so I haven't been in the water since December 7th, and I doubt if I'll ever go in again.

December 7th of every year we have a ceremony, they have it over in the Navy base or they have it over here. Starting in 2010, it will be back here at the Visitor Center. But, on

December 7th, we have the ceremony. The planes on December 7th were very slow planes; nowadays they're very fast and they always come in over our thing with the missing man formation, and they come in, dive on the center here, and they'll dive down in, and then they'll go right straight up, and every time they go up like that, chills go down my spine and I find myself right out there in front of Battleship Row picking up the people on December 7th. Otherwise, the rest of the year I'm talking about it day and night and it never bothers me in the slightest, only on December 7th.

Q: Could we try that one again? I'm sorry, but...

A: I get my two .45s out here.

Q: It's not just him, it's me too.

A: Okay, ready? On December 7th, of each year we have a ceremony, actually, the ship will come in and it goes right through the bridge coming over there, right on time at 8:10 and it will blow it's whistle, and when it blows the missile, the missing man formation will come in and dive right here onto the center, and the planes nowadays are not slow like they were in 1941, they're very fast, but when it dives it will come down and then it goes straight up, vroom, and when it goes up like that, all the feeling goes right down my spine and I find myself right out there in the water in front of Battleship Row picking up the people on December 7th.

(34.46 Recording skips) ...88, November 29, 2009.

Q: You've had a long, distinguished career.

A: Well, I was eight years in the Navy, 16 in the Army, 8½ in the State Department, and when I came back I went back to Schofield for another 23 years with the Army Club system, so 57 years government service.

Q: Thank you very much for taking the time.

A: Hey, it couldn't happen to nicer people. It would have been nicer if they'd had been set up at 7:00.

Q: That's right, next time.